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KING HARISIMHA OF MITHILĀ

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The kings of the Karṇāṭaka dynasty of Mithilā ruled in an unbroken line of succession throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries A.D. Nānyadeva, the founder of the dynasty, was a contemporary of Vijayasena of Bengal, belonging to a Karṇāṭa Kshatriya family.[1] Next to Nānyadeva, Harisiṁha was the most important ruler, and his reign forms a landmark in the history of Tirhut. Unlike his predecessors, who are mostly shadowy figures of whom very little is known, certain broad facts about Harisiṁha are established on unimpeachable authority. He had his capital at a place called Simarāmapura,[2] modern Simraon in Nepāl, on the borderland just outside the north-eastern boundary of the District of Champāran.[3] Three generations of able ministers, namely, Chaṇḍeśvara, his father Vīreśvara, and his grandfather Devāditya, all served as *Mahā-sandhi-vigrahikas* (Minister of Peace and War) of Harisiṁha.[4] It is mentioned in contemporary literature that Chaṇḍeśvara conquered Nepāl for his master, and performed the great religious gift of *tulā-purusha* (gift of gold of the donor's weight) in November, 1314.[5] This gives us a valuable datum for fixing the lowest limit of the date of Harisiṁha's accession. In view of the fact that Chaṇḍeśvara, who served him in A.D. 1314, was preceded by his father and grandfather in the same post, we may assume that according to all reasonable probability Harisiṁha ascended the throne during the last decade of the thirteenth century A.D. if not earlier.

[1] For Vijayasena, Cf. *History of Bengal*, Vol. I, Edited by R. C. Majumdar.
[2] Some call it Śivarāmpura (*Singh*, 59).
[3] "The ruins of Simraon still exist in Nepalese lowlands about 15 miles from the base of the hills in the Nepalese district of Rotahat" (*Thakur*, 252 f.n. 1).
[4] *MC.*, 410.
[5] *Ibid*, 411.

This is, however, opposed to the traditional account of Śakrasiṁha, who was the predecessor and father of Harisiṁha according to the Mithilā tradition. The inscription of Pratāpamalla, however, calls him Śaktisiṁha and places a king Bhūpālasiṁha between him and Harisiṁhadeva. It has been suggested by some that as neither the literary traditions nor any other evidence corroborate this, Bhūpālasiṁha was the elder brother of Harisiṁha and probably never ascended the throne.[6] This gratuitous assumption has been rendered necessary by a Mithilā tradition that Śakrasiṁha helped 'Alā-ud-dīn Khaljī "in his fight against Hammīra (Hambira) of Raṇastambhapura".[7] There are other traditions according to which the Muslims invaded Mithilā in 697 A. H. (A. D. 1297-8) and arrested the king.[8] None of these traditions is, however, supported by Muslim Chronicles or any other reliable evidence. As the invasion of Ranthambhor took place in A. D. 1300, Śaktisiṁha must have been alive in that year, and if Bhūpālasiṁha reigned between him and Harisiṁha—a statement occurring in a seventeenth century epigraphic record which we have no good grounds to disbelieve—Harisiṁha's accession has to be placed at the end of the first decade of the fourteenth century. This appears to be so improbable, in view of what has been said above, that it seems more reasonable to disregard the local traditions and place the accession of Harisiṁha somewhere about A. D. 1285.[9]

There are several references in contemporary literature that Harisiṁha defeated the Muslims. In the *Dāna-ratnākara*, Chaṇḍeśvara is described as having rescued the earth flooded by the Mlechchhas. In a two-act comedy, *Dhūrta-samāgama*, which was played in the court of Harisiṁha, the king is said to have conquered the Suratrāṇa (Sultān).[10] These statements have been taken to refer to Harisiṁha's fight with Ghiyās-ud-dīn Tughluq in A. D. 1324. But, if, as is generally believed, king Harisiṁha was defeated in that fight and forced to seek refuge in Nepāl, the exulting references to victories over the Muslims can hardly apply to that episode. In any case it is equally likely that Harisiṁha scored successes against the Muslims either during the last days of the Mamluk Sultāns after the death of Balban (A. D. 1287), or during the chaos and confusion that followed the death of 'Alā-ud-dīn Khaljī (A. D. 1316). There is nothing to be surprised at the discomfiture of the Muslim forces, probably of a neighbouring locality, when the Delhi Sultanate was passing through a grave crisis, and this had a great repercussion on the provincial administration.

Similarly the conquest of Nepāl by Chaṇḍeśvara, mentioned above,

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[6] *Thakur*, 279.
[7] *Thakur*, 275; *RKC*, 113.
[8] *RKC*. 113
[9] Thakur, relying on Mithilā traditions, places the accession of Harisimha about A.D. 1303 or 1307 (p. 279), but M. Chakravarti places his reign in the last decade of the thirteenth century (p. 411), and R. K. Chaudhari places his accession in A.D. 1285 (*RKC*. 113).
[10] *MC*, 411.

need not necessarily be referred to a time after the defeat of Harisiṁha by Ghiyās-ud-dīn Tughluq. According to the interpretation of the relevant passage by Monmohan Chakravarti, the *tulā-purusha* ceremony, celebrated in A. D. 1314, followed upon the conquest of Nepāl, and this seems to be a very reasonable view.[11]

If we accept the above reconstruction of the history of Harisiṁha's reign, we can easily understand why Ghiyās-ud-dīn Tughluq directed his efforts towards the subjugation of Tirhut, a task not attempted by any other Sultān of Delhi before him. It is reasonable to infer that Mithilā had so long escaped Muslim subjugation only because it was regarded as an inoffensive petty Hindu State, not unwilling to bow down to a strong Sultān. But Harisiṁha took advantage of the temporary weakness of the Muslim rulers to hurl defiance at them and even scored some successes. Such occasional resurgence of the Hindu power must have been regarded as a source of grave peril to the Muslim domination in India, and the sagacious Sultān, Ghiyās-ud-dīn Tughluq, had therefore every reason to regard the subjugation of Mithilā as a major policy.

Ghiyās-ud-dīn's conquest of Tirhut in A. D. 1324-5 was, however, hardly regarded as an important episode of his reign. Baranī simply states, in a general way, that as soon as the Sultān reached Tirhut on his way to Bengal, "without the sword being called into requisition all the *rais* and *ranas* of the country made their submission".[12] The episode of Tirhut is altogether omitted in the *Tārikh-i-Mubārak Shāhī*, while Nizām-ud-dīn merely repeats the statement of Baranī. 'Isāmī is the first histōrian who gives a detailed account of the Tirhut expedition. After referring to the capture of Sultān Bahādur of Lakhnāwatī and the arrival of the captive king with his brother Nasīr-ud-dīn at the camp of Sultān Ghiyās-ud-dīn on the bank of the Kosi, 'Isāmī proceeds:

"Next day the Sultān started from the bank of the Kosi towards Tirhut. He secured two kings at one and the same time, one by war, the other by peace.[13] As soon as the king of Tirhut heard of the approach of the Sultān he took refuge in a forest. The imperial army reached the outskirts of the forest. The Sultān was very much surprised at the sight of the forest. It is said that he himself got down from his horse, and taking an axe in his hand cut down an old tree in order to clear the jungle. The soldiers, thereupon, cleared a passage of the army with the help of axes. In two or three days the passage was ready, and on the third day the imperial army reached the fort of Tirhut. It had seven deep ditches full of water. For two or three weeks the Sultān sent his soldiers to the right and the left with orders to attack the Hindus wherever gathered, and plunder them. After this he sent (Nasīr-ud-dīn) with royal umbrella to Lakhnāwatī. The

[11] *MC*, 411.
[12] *HIED*, III, 234.
[13] Evidently the two kings were Bahādur and Nasīr-ud-dīn.

Sultān left the valiant Ahmad, son of Talbaga, in Tirhut and, having started from the camp on the next day, reached the capital in one or two months".[14]

A more detailed account is given by Firishta. He expressly refers to 'Isāmī's book *Futūh-us-Salātīn*; yet, he describes the events following the siege as follows:

"The king invested the place, filled up the ditches, and destroyed the wall in three weeks. The Raja and his family were taken, and great booty obtained, while the government of Tirhoot was left in the hands of Ahmud Khan, the son of Mallik Tubligha, after whicht he king returned towards Dehly.[15]

It will be seen that the two accounts radically differ from each other. The earlier account, written by a contemporary, says nothing of the fall of the fort and the capture of the king of Tirhut and his family. Moreover, it definitely implies that when the Sultān left for Delhi, he could not secure the submission of the king of Tirhut and left Ahmad behind to continue the siege. The two contemporary historians, 'Isāmī and Baranī, and almost all the later writers, excepting Firishta, are silent regarding any success of the Muslim arms, not to speak of capturing the fort together with the king of Tirhut and his family. 'Isāmī's book, which alone is expressly mentioned by Firishta as his source of information, contains nothing of the kind. It is legitimate, therefore, to conclude that the additional information supplied by Firishta is mostly a later concoction prompted by a desire to gloss over the failure of the Muslims to subdue a petty Hindu king.[16]

We may, therefore, hold that while the Muslim army overran the plains of Tirhut, its brave king Harisiṁhadeva successfully defended himself in his impregnable citadel in the dense forest of Nepāl Terai. This not only explains why Muslim historians like Baranī, Yahiyā, and Nizām-ud-dīn do not refer to the fight of the Sultān with Harisiṁha, but also the verse in *Dhūrta-samāgama*, a contemporary two-act comedy played in the court of Harisiṁha, which exultingly refers to the victory of Harisiṁha and his ministers over the Muslim Sultān after a protracted and sanguinary fight.[17]

It may be noted in passing that the citadel, where Harisiṁhadeva was besieged by the Muslim forces, can hardly be regarded as his capital Simraon, although this is the generally accepted view. For no one whose kingdom mostly extends over the plains would think of fixing his capital city in a dense forest where no army could penetrate without cutting down

[14] This extract from 'Isāmī's *Futūh-us-Salātīn*, composed about the middle of the 14th century A.D., is based on the Hindi translation of Rizvi (*TKB*, I. 90).

[15] *Briggs*, I, 406-7.

[16] There are other instances of similar exaggeration by later Muslim chroniclers, even in respect of Tirhut, for example the conquest of that kingdom by Sikandar Lodī, as described by Badāūnī.

[17] *MC*. 411 f.n. It is somewhat disconcerting to find that Firishta's account should be unanimously accepted, even after the discovery of the *Futūh-us-Salātīn*.

trees on a vast scale. Indeed 'Isāmī clearly says that the king of Mithilā took refuge in a forest. Such a statement would be inexplicable if he shut himself up in his own capital city.[18]

According to a well-known verse Harisiṁha entered the mountains, after leaving his capital city, in Śaka 1245, on the 9th of *Pausha*, *Śudi*, Saturday.[19] This has been taken to refer to the flight of Harisiṁha and his conquest of Nepāl after his defeat at the hands of Ghiyās-ud-dīn Tughluq. But, as such, the date is inadmissible for two reasons. In the first place, it corresponds to December, 1323, whereas according to the testimony of Muslim chronicles, Ghiyās-ud-dīn Tughluq passed through Tirhut a year later in the cold season of A. D. 1324. Secondly 9th *Pausha* in Śaka 1245, whether we take it as current or expired, was not a Saturday. But 9th *Pausha* in Śaka 1247 expired was a Saturday. This date, which corresponds to 14th December 1325, seems to be the correct one.[20] As we have seen above, according to the contemporary Muslim chronicler,'Islāmī, Harisiṁha was besieged, but not defeated, when Ghiyās-ud-dīn left for Delhi towards the end of A. D. 1324 or the beginning of 1325. If we admit, on the authority of the *Dhūrta-samāgama*, that Harisiṁha offered a stubborn resistance and inflicted some defeat upon the imperial army, 14th December, 1325, may be taken as a more probable date for Harisiṁha's entry into Nepāl after the end of the conflict. As we have seen above, there is no evidence that Harisiṁha fell a prisoner into the hands of the Muslims, as Firishta would have us believe. It is more likely that he successfully defied the Muslim forces in the impenetrable jungles of the Terai. But though Harisiṁha passed over the crisis, he knew full well that he was no match for the Sultān of Delhi, and could not resist his might in the plains. So he rightly concluded that he could maintain his independence only in the hills and jungles of Nepāl. It has been assumed by the latest historian of Tirhut that Harisiṁha, after his defeat, "fled from Tirhut, invaded Nepāl and settled down there for the rest of his life".[21] It is very unlikely, though not impossible, that a king deserting his people and kingdom, and fleeing for his life, would be in a position to subdue a country like Nepāl, whose geographical position and natural defences have enabled it to maintain its independence throughout the Muslim and even during the British rule. It is more reasonable to suppose that he had already conquered Nepāl in the heyday of his power and glory, particularly as there are grounds for dating this event in or before A. D. 1314 as mentioned above. It is also not unlikely that the resources of Nepāl enabled him to successfully resist the Sultān of Delhi in the jungle, when he was forced to leave the plains of

[18] The same argument applies to Firishta's statement "that as the king was passing near the hills of Tirhoot, the Raja appeared in arms, but was pursued into the woods" (*Briggs*, I, 406-7)

[19] *Levi*, II, 224. For a slightly different form of the verse cf. *POC*, II. 564.

[20] *Ibid*.

[21] *Thakur*, 283-4,

Tirhut before the invading Muslim army. What probably took place in A. D. 1325 was that Harisiṁha was forced to abandon his own kingdom and settle in Nepāl which had already acknowledged his suzerainty. The traditional verse mentioned above also says that he entered (*āviveśa* or *praveśa*), not conquered, Nepāl.

However that might be, there is no doubt that after the conquest of the plains of Tirhut by the Muslim forces in A. D. 1325, Harisiṁhadeva passes out of the history of that country, and henceforth he and his family are associated with Nepāl rather than Tirhut.[22]

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[22] This article forms a part of the Chapter on the history of Mithilā written by the author for *The History of the Indian People*, Vol. VI. It is published in advance to elicit criticism on the views, propounded for the first time, regarding the relation between Harisiṁha and Ghiyās-ud-dīn Tughluq and several other points, which radically differ from those expressed by the most recent writers on the history of Mithilā,

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